

Monarchs of the place of hope: nobility of the lineage of the jaguar, Ti Taulepa Lenca.

By Chief Chevez, 2015

The origin of human groups in the Americas is still debated in terms of origins, points of entry and times of arrival. What is not for debate is that by the time of European invasion in 1492, humans had populated, depopulated and repopulated many regions along the great lands of the Americas. This article examines the official view of the nobility of the Ti Taulepa, the hereditary ruling house of the Lenca –Taulepa of Central America, the last monarchy alive in the Americas today.

For classification purposes, the indigenous of the Americas, who were in these lands during the last ice age, are called Paleo-indians. “The period spans from approximately 15,000 B.C. to the end of the Pleistocene Ice Age about 7,000 B.C. The period marks the first colonization of the New World by Homo sapiens.”¹ Among those early settlers are the human groups living in one geographical area called by them ‘Managuara’ which can be translated to ‘kingdom of the magical or powerful macaw’.²

These early families are now known as the Lenca people. These people established a peculiar form of government that is now deemed a Heterocracy, made by a royalty as arbitration hub, a collection of dependencies with great diversity and autonomy, a council of chiefs and one unifying mythology.

The members of this union preserved their hereditary traditions, but to be part of the tribal heterocracy, they submitted and swore allegiance to the clan of Ti Wana Tuku, who was the first mortal ancestor of the Taulepa or Jaguar House. This lineage was credited with the wisdom of arts, science, astronomy and state craft. Their lands are the soils on which the modern states of Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua are built. Its ancestral possessions also include small enclaves in Veraguas Panama and Sarapiki (Sarapiquí) in Costa Rica.

The time of the dawn of these first societies was a period when the earth was different from what is today, the oceans were many meters shallower, and there were many mountain chains across bodies of water, allowing easier mobilization of animals and humans from one land to another. The need to move forward was not merely based on curiosity, instead, humans moved with their food. As the ice froze the northern and southern latitudes, the animals and

¹ <http://www.nichbelize.org/ia-archaeology/paleo-indian-period.html>

² This how the last speakers and hereditary rulers call their land.

people migrated towards the warmer centre of the planet. Central America and the Caribbean islands were an ideal paradise.

During this period, large fauna coexisted with humans, giving them the much needed pelts, meat and bones to elaborate clothing, roofing, nutrition, weapons and utensils. In one of these regions, scientists have found fossil evidence of these extinct animals that lived until the end of the ice age.³ This age also brought great changes to land and living things. For instance, deglaciation produced great flooding and extinctions of flora and fauna.⁴ Animals and few humans who fled cold climates, were then forced to move inland to higher grounds as deglaciation and sea rising occurred.

In northern Managua or modern El Salvador⁵, scientists have found a myriad of remains of animals that inhabited Lenca lands towards the end of the glacial era. “[E]xcavation in El Salvador were made by scientists David J. Guzman and Jorge Larde. In their papers, they make references to some sites where they found fossils. In 1942, a paleontologist who studied Salvadorean prehistoric mammals, Dr. R. A. Stirton discovered seven extinct mammals that lived here.”⁶ Indeed, being a site further away from the North and the South Pole, the Lenca lands were the last refuge for the climate refugees of the last ice age.⁷ The early Lenca people lived side by side with the post-dinosaur fauna and flora.⁸

The hereditary rulers of the Lenca people hold a rich and ancient oral tradition that celebrates animals that no longer exist. These were deemed satanic representations by early Christians who were unaware of their existence in past eras. The role the extinct animals played in Lenca life was so paramount that their images were woven into the cosmovision for thousands of years. Later, when other Mesoamerican cultures penetrated Lenca lands, the Lenca people were unwilling to adopt the new world views introduced by their new guests. To date, the surviving Lenca orators keep the ancient stories that are unique to them. In these, they celebrate and revere the mighty totems that helped them build a civilization. Having members from

³ Webb, S. D., & Perrigo, S. C. (1984). Late Cenozoic vertebrates from Honduras and El Salvador. *Journal of Vertebrate Paleontology*, 237-254.

⁴ Blanchon, P., & Shaw, J. (1995). Reef drowning during the last deglaciation: evidence for catastrophic sea-level rise and ice-sheet collapse. *Geology*, 23(1), 4-8.

⁵ Dull, R. A. (2004). An 8000-year record of vegetation, climate, and human disturbance from the Sierra de Apaneca, El Salvador. *Quaternary Research*, 61(2), 159-167.

⁶ http://www.paleophilatelie.eu/description/stamps/el_salvador_1979.html

⁷ Cisneros, J. C. (2008). The fossil mammals of El Salvador. *Neogene Mammals. Bull New Mexico Mus Nat Hist Sci*, 44, 375-380.

⁸ MacFadden, B. J. (2006). Extinct mammalian biodiversity of the ancient New World tropics. *Trends in Ecology & Evolution*, 21(3), 157-165.

diverse migrating groups created a multicultural society. This is one of the main reasons why the Lenca people spoke several languages, deemed by linguists as ‘isolates’. Its diversity is a reflection of aggregation of unrelated families, who were survivors of great displacement due to climate change. Fortunately, these ecological refugees become aggregated parts of one tolerant royal federation. In the face of being overrun and depleted by new cultural imports, the original clan, asserted their chiefly symbolism by utilizing the most immediate and impressive beast they had, the Smilodon.⁹ The members of the nobility branded themselves as the ‘Lepa family’ which is akin to ‘smilodon or jaguar family’.

There is no doubt that one powerful icon that galvanizes and epitomizes the axis of power and prestige in the Lenca royalty is their feline totem. These days, the royal totem of the hereditary lineage is the Jaguar, which is a descendant of the smilodon. This animal was revered and feared by most pre-Columbian civilizations. For the Lencas, this animal is their friend and protector. There are abundant oral accounts of the role that this feline played in the development, power and tenure of the royal family. This creature is the first domesticated beats in glacial-deglacial era. One can only imagine the Lenca ruler arriving to provinces, flanked by mighty, ice-age felines, peacefully walking side by side. This scene would have commanded so much power over the terrified villagers, who may have attributed god-like power to the master of these beasts.

According to the oral tradition, Ti Lepa was a strong and big feline. This creature lived in the Lenca forests, and it was very acquainted with the lives of the people. The story tells that when the ruler of the Lenca made the laws defining what animals people could kill to eat, and what was forbidden; she named the feline as prohibited to be killed under any circumstance. The narrative tells that in gratitude, the Lepa gave the royals a handful of baby jaguars, so that they would protect the royal house from enemies. Since then, the ruler had two jaguars at the base of the royal throne, a throne that still exhibits the worn marks of where these animals were tied to.¹⁰ The seating ruler with two jaguars on guard is a common them among certain elites of pre-Columbian of Central and South American world. The ancient accounts of powerful female rulers, guarded by jaguars, travelled with the branches that left to set new kingdoms along the continent as this warmed up again.¹¹

⁹ Carlos, L., & Nocke, C. C. (2000). *A Guide to the Carnivores of Central America: Natural History, Ecology, and Conservation*. University of Texas Press.

¹⁰ Se photograph of the lenca taulepa throne in the Appendix

¹¹ Se appendix with pre-Columbian artefacts depicting the royal emblems of other sites with the same Taulepa shield.

The jaguar described in the narrative is not the jaguar that we know today. The story mentions of the enormous teeth, the strong and bulky body, and the powerful legs. The oral tradition says that the ruler of the people possessed the teeth of the jaguars as his weapons. He owned these teeth after each royal jaguar died of old age. The rocks placed at Ti Ketau Antawinikil, a Paleo-indian cave in eastern El Salvador, are said to have been moved by ropes tied to jaguars. Indeed, the Lencas it will seem, domesticated in their royal enclosure, the last smilodons of the deglaciation era. In their stone carvings, they immortalized the big teeth of their royal totem.¹²

Although for many centuries the Lenca Taulepa narrative was dismissed as fantasy of hallucinogenic origin, researchers in 1970s unearthed solid evidence of the existence of the feline claimed by the lenca nobility to be their patron, and of several other extinct animals that inhabited Lenca lands till the end of the glacial era. For example, “fossils of mammoth were found in eastern El Salvador. [one of these cats] weighed approximately 55 to 470 kg , depending on species. It had a short tail, powerful legs, muscular neck and long canines. Smilodon was more robustly built than any modern cat, comparable to a bear.”¹³

With the finding, the archaic oral account of the noble family of the Lenca Taulepa was vindicated as an echo of a period when the narrow bridge of land that was bathed by warmer oceans and covered by green vegetation, housed the early settlers and migrating species of the Americas. This region was indeed a little Noah’s ark and was to become the homeland to several notable civilizations in eras ahead.¹⁴

Another Lenca Taulepa site that gives us an insight on the ecosystem of the first families is one in Western El Salvador. This site still keeps the Lenca Taulepa name of ‘the settlements of the forested place’ Tio Maia-tre, known today as Tomayate, after the Mexicanization of toponyms. Here, scientists discovered another rich deposit of bones from the glacial era, which among others, includes a giant horse.¹⁵

Other sites in the ancestral landscape of the Lenca Taulepa have also yielded valuable assets as testimony of the last specimens roaming these lands.¹⁶ Items include a giant tooth

¹² The Jaguar of Quelepa : <http://tierradeljaguardepiedra.blogspot.com.au/>

¹³ http://www.paleophilatelie.eu/description/stamps/el_salvador_1979.html

¹⁴ Adams, Richard E. W.; MacLeod (eds.), Murdo J. (2000). *Cambridge History of the Native peoples of The Americas: VOLUME II: MESOAMERICA. 2.* Cambridge University Press.

¹⁵ <http://greaterancestors.com/a-giant-horse-from-el-salvador/>

¹⁶ Cisneros, J. C. (2005). New pleistocene vertebrate fauna from El Salvador. *Revista Brasileira de Paleontologia*, 8(3), 239-255.

found in Sesori, eastern El Salvador.¹⁷ Once again, it comes to prove that the story of the powerful creatures that left this world, is not a mythological story, it is a reality of the first world the Lenca Taulepa lived in. These animals were a threat, companions and sometimes food to the early Lencas. These animals were crucial for this dynasty to survive.

In Nicaragua, which is the centre of the ancient landscape of the Lenca people, we can also report the findings of archaic fauna. These include elephants and other animals, that according to researchers “ these elephant-like creatures lived during the Late Pleistocene (the Pleistocene lasted from about 1.8 million to 10,000 years ago), plodding over what is now the United States and as far south as Nicaragua and Honduras.”¹⁸ The inhabited Lenca caves in El Salvador and Honduras date back to that time, 10 to 14 thousand years ago.¹⁹

Since the thawing of the ice sheets and the subsequent elevation of the sea levels, the Lenca people had to deal with another catastrophic period. This period saw many of their sacred landscapes on the Pacific and Caribbean coast, submerged by sea water. The Lenca Matriarch, narrating the oral accounts of their royal enclosure states: “ The plot of land [of the family] was on the waters of what is now the pacific ocean [eastern El Salvador]. In those days, our land was bigger, the edge was further away from what is today. One day, a big tremor made the ocean swallow up our district, for that, we were moved to our other royal dwellings, the caves. We had other caves on the sea shores that we still call Las Cuevitas, these are deep under water these days.”²⁰

It is undeniable that the people called Lenca survived the great periods of climate change in our human history in the Americas. By the time the Spanish invaded their lands in 1500s, the Lenca people had a vibrant multicultural trading bloc. Their resilience had ensured adaption to the challenges thrown to them. They were subjugated by the colonial powers, subdivided with six borders, some taken as slaves to work in Cuba, when the natives there died by forced labour. Many other Lencas were also forced to accompany other conquistador to South America, in their search for more land to plunder.

Despite all, the struggling royal dynasty survived by ensuring obedience to the imperial masters, oftentimes running away to the mountains to escape the colonial wars among

¹⁷ <http://www.laprensagrafica.com/confirman-hallazgo-de-fosiles-de-mastodonte-en-san-miguel>

¹⁸ <https://www.livescience.com/3272-mammoth-bones-san-diego.html>

¹⁹ http://www.wide-format-printers.org/FLAAR_report_covers/705570_sacred_Mayan_Underworld_Xibalba_caves_Guatemala_Popol-Vuh_iconography_archaeology_digital-photography.pdf

²⁰ Personal communication (Francisca, G.R. 1991).

conquistadors. Unfortunately, after the Spanish granted independence to El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua, the new elites legislated to officially disposes the Lencas from their lands. These lands, had been allowed to be administered by the Lencas in Spanish times. Under Spanish rule, some of these lands were classified as Ejidos de Indios. In the view of the new republics, indigenous land titles were an affront on the principles of a modern republic and an obstacle on its development. The last royal holding of the las noble family, called Managuara, was eventually passed to the president of El Salvador, Gerardo Barrios.

This desire for more land was propelled by the introduction of coffee as a national crop. “In the late 19th century, the state actively dispossessed peasant communities in favor of commercial agriculture by privatizing communal indigenous lands. With that said, 1932 and its aftermath had an even more tragic impact on indigenous populations.”²¹

The landless status and the conditions that this brought on the indigenous people, in 1932, many ethnic groups rose and demanded access to their land.²² El Salvadorian government responded by killing in mass as many as 30,000 demonstrators.²³ The Lenca chiefs did not travel to western El Salvador, and for this reason survived the execution of tribal chiefs that followed the uprising.

Much later, in the period 1980-1992, the precarious communities that had survived faced the cruel civil war. The Lenca dynastic descendants fled their village El Tihuilotal, which was one of the early to be burned by the government’s armed forces. They formed part of the great population of internally displaced people in the embattled small nation of El Salvador.

Under war conditions, the Lenca matriarch Francisca ensured that her oral tradition was documented by his grandson. She taught him language, stories and she described the important of many sites and landmarks as they moved across the region, evading the ongoing skirmishes between leftist guerrillas and government forces. This struggle for survival lasted until 1992, when the UN-mediated peace accords was signed, ending the civil war.

In 1994, the Lenca family responded to the UN call for a ‘decade’ on indigenous issues. Promptly, the family announced their resumption of dynastic role. This was followed by a

²¹ DeLugan, R. M. (2013). Commemorating from the margins of the nation: El Salvador 1932, indigeneity, and transnational belonging. *Anthropological Quarterly*, 86(4), 965-994.

²² Fuentes, H. L. (2004). Políticas de la memoria: El levantamiento de 1932 en El Salvador. *Revista de Historia*, (49-50).

²³ Tilley, V. Q. (2002). New help or new hegemony? The transnational indigenous peoples' movement and being Indian'in El Salvador. *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 525-554.

unilateral proclamation of a draft of a small charter of principles that were to become the cultural constitution of the Lenca. The act of proclaiming Lenca rights drew attention from death squads. Between 1994 and 1995, several attacks were perpetrated against the family, resulting in fatalities and the diminishing of public life by the nobles.

In 1995, during the last attack, the Lenca chief escaped but his body guard died. His office was ransacked and his archives and collection of family relics were destroyed and others stolen. As a result, he was forced to make the painful decision to go into exile.

Since the exile in 1996, the Taulepa dynasty manages the cultural stewardship from Australia. From there, they coordinate the ongoing registry of Lencas around the globe, they promote cultural revival at home, pressure the republic to reform the constitution²⁴ and maintain an open-ended negotiation to regain the right to have an autonomous district for the ruling house in eastern El Salvador.

The 2020's Lenca agenda is in its final phase. The Lenca Chief and the republic of El Salvador are discussing options to redress not only issues related to the Lenca people in general, but specifically, the ones related to the Jaguar House, an institution that was almost extinguished. An entity rooted in paleolithic times, that in modern times, was dispossessed and forced to the cruellest treatment for a national treasure of this calibre.

The Taulepa and its members are working to ensure that their oral tradition, world view and roles are preserved and secured in the present and into the future. The Chief maintains a global outreach program, assisting all Lencas by providing them with cultural expertise, so that they can maintain a sense of identity. Since 2012, the Lenca Chief grants the highest honour from his dynasty and nation, the Ti Manauelike Lenca medal. The Lenca people wanted to survive and today, they refuse to give up. With the enhancement of international rights of indigenous people, the national reform in El Salvador, and with the unyielding commitment to cultural preservation by the family, the future of the Lenca Taulepa House is more secure.

²⁴ <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=14734&LangID=E>

Appendix



Francisca – The Lenca Matriarch and lenca cave depicting lineage of female rulers



The royal throne of the Lenca Chief.

Lenca cave art depicting ancient male chief.



Lenca Jaguar Emblem



Example of smilodon from the last ice age



Four shields from Aguada Argentina, exhibiting the same theme as the lencas of the Ice Age. The ruling matriarch and the two felines guarding her person. The Lenca nobility holds that their descendants dispersed far and wide.